

Nebraska

(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)

Provided by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (no author attribution) as part of “Preserving the History of United States Agriculture and Rural Life: State and Local Literature, 1820-1945. A proposal submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Preservation and Access on behalf of the United States Agricultural Information Network”

July 1995

NEBRASKA

Bugeaters, Cornhuskers, Tree Planter's, and the Great American Desert, are all words found in the literature that describe the people and region of what is now Nebraska. As these words imply, and the documentary record confirms, the history of the state is inextricably interwoven with its agricultural development. The early settlers came not for gold, but rather for land to farm and ranch. Nebraska is now one of the chief farming states in the U.S. with 92% of its land in crops and pasture - a higher percentage than any other state.

Overland trails across Nebraska, including the famous Oregon Trail, were well established by the 1840's. Over the next 25 years, thousands of emigrants from eastern states and foreign countries traveled in covered wagons through Nebraska--and some stayed on to farm. The first large groups of settlers were Germans. Later came Czechs, Swedes, Danes, and Russians. While much of the initial investment capital in the territory was by speculators seeking big returns, by 1860 agriculture had proven to be a dependable way of making a living. The Free Homestead Act of 1863 further encouraged homesteading--by paying a small fee, any citizen who lived upon the land for five years could claim 160 acres. Nebraska was the site of the first United States homestead claimed by Daniel Freeman on January 1, 1863.

After the Civil War, the state's population rapidly increased and Nebraska achieved statehood in 1867. The soil was good and agriculture and rural society flourished. Sod corn, flax, and forage crops were typical crops along with potatoes and other vegetables raised for food. Later crops included spring wheat, and sorghum for making molasses. Wild fruits and wild game, along with chickens, hogs and cattle, helped feed rural families. The new state received 3,370,000 acres of land from the federal government for public use, including the establishment of the University of Nebraska (UNL) and its Agricultural College. The College vigorously supported farmers, ranchers, and the farm community through publications, radio programs, field days, and demonstrations such as the Nebraska Tractor Tests, begun in 1921.

The completion, in 1869, of the Union Pacific Railroad across Nebraska was a critical factor in the settlement and development of the state and profoundly affected rural life and agricultural economy. The railroads advertised the great wonders of the state but made no mention of the hardships the settlers might encounter. The vast prairie ocean was well suited to raising cattle and horses, but it could also just as easily turn into a lake of fire--a constant fear of homestead families. The lack of trees, the depth of the water table, and the distance to streams were major obstacles. Crude sod houses and dugouts were common because of the scarcity of wood.

Representative railroad company pamphlets designed to sell farmland and to attract settlers to the new West will be preserved in the project, including *Guide to the Union Pacific Railroad Lands, 1870*, "12,000,000 acres, best farming and mineral lands in America, for sale by the Union Pacific Railroad Company, in tracts to suit purchasers and at low prices," and the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad's publication, *Great Opportunities for Farmers, Business Men and Investors in Nebraska, Northwestern Kansas, and Eastern Colorado*.

The published literature and primary research resources documenting the history of agriculture and rural life in Nebraska reveal the major concerns of the day--prairie fires, access to water, the lack of trees, the periodic frightening invasions of grasshoppers and locusts, the battles between farmers and ranchers, and the constant struggle to learn and adapt to an unknown land. Unknowing pioneer farmers plowed up the prairie grasses for crops, but often hard rains and winds carried off much of the rich topsoil. The response to these challenges by Nebraska's people, rural communities, and agricultural economy formed the character and politics of the region.

Early Settlers had little money to buy clothing or supplies because of limited markets for their agricultural products. They made do with what they grew or gathered from their immediate surroundings. The coming of the railroads not only created a market for farming, but also enabled the establishment of large ranches. Cattle ranching grew quickly with access to eastern markets, "cattle barons" ruled the range. Cattle raising on a large scale became very profitable since the range was free and there were no taxes. The literature reveals the conflicts that arose and festered between farmers and ranchers when livestock invaded fields and ruined crops. The Herd Law of 1871, enacted to protect farmers, required cattle owners to pay for damages when livestock overran planted fields. The literature of the day reflects these fierce battles for resources, including the notorious battles of "Old Jules" Sandoz, a Nebraska homesteader and early leader in horticulture who encouraged and supported the settlement of land by farmers rather than cattlemen.

The pioneers found Nebraska to be a vast expanse of treeless plains. In 1872, J. Sterling Morton, a journalist who later became the United States Secretary of Agriculture, presented a resolution to the State Board of Agriculture..."to urge upon the people of the State, the vital importance of tree planting, hereby offer a special premium of one hundred dollars to the county agricultural society of that county in Nebraska, which shall upon that day, plant properly, the largest number of trees; and a farm library of twenty-five dollars' worth of books to that person who, on that day, shall plant properly, in Nebraska the greatest number of trees." Literally millions of trees were planted on that first Arbor Day. With seedlings easily gathered from the belt of timber lining the rivers and from the sandbars, the state began to bring trees to the prairie, forever altering the landscape and ecology of the region. Partly as a result of this early conservationist tradition, Nebraska's soil still yields an abundance of crops, although soil erosion and drought continue to be major concerns.

Historians of the agrarian West and the Gilded Age find rich materials in the writings of J. Sterling Morton. His published speeches on farming, farm finance, and Arbor Day are found in the Special Collections at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and will be included in this project--including a speech delivered at Nebraska City upon the occasion of the First Nebraska Territorial Agricultural Fair, September 21-23, 1859. It is a measure of his influence that Lincoln, Nebraska, is still home to the National Arbor Day Foundation. *Corn is King!: Corn, its Origins, History, Uses and Abuses*, by R.W. Furnas (editor of the Nebraska Advertiser in Brownville, and later Governor of Nebraska) is another example of a publication of interest to historians.

The published literature also documents the struggle of early farmers to learn and adapt to an unknown climate and land. Coming from eastern states or Europe, settlers knew little of planting crops suited to a dry, harsh climate and the prairie topography. Dry years in the 1870's and 1890's caused many farmers to fail and return east provoking literature such as *Starving to Death on a Government Claim*, which expressed the frustrations of the time. However, the drought years also ignited interest in irrigation techniques and the development of the systems of irrigation that have transformed the West.

If the droughts didn't cause farmers to fail, grasshoppers and Rocky Mountain locusts, often did. Great clouds of these pests traveled hundreds of miles to devour anything in their paths. Between 1857 and 1875, eight such infestations were recorded: corn fields were eaten in a day, buds and bark were eaten off trees, and potatoes and onions were devoured in the ground. The literature documents that panic and fear of starvation were the norm as the devastation continued. After the July 1874 infestation, many settlers sold or simply gave away their claims and returned east, signs hung from their wagons, "Eaten out by grasshoppers. Going back east to live with wife's folks."

After the early 1900's the state experienced a steady growth in population. The Kinkaid Homestead Act of 1904 encouraged settlement of the western part of the state, especially of the sand hills region. 640 acres could be acquired by living on the land for five years and investing \$1000 worth of improvements. Although 8,000,000 acres were available, most of the land was sandy and rough. Well-intentioned homesteaders plowed the land and tried to raise the crops with which they were familiar. Damage caused from blowing led to severe conservation problems and caused many to sell their claims to the cattlemen. Others adapted and began raising cattle for themselves. As the early settlers found out, the land of Nebraska varies greatly, each region requiring a different set of farming and ranching practices. The University of Nebraska Agricultural College led the way in publishing and teaching farmers and ranchers how best to use and preserve the land. Few areas of the country were so free of stones and so easily tilled, making Nebraska's soils its greatest natural resource.

The wartime prosperity between 1910 and 1920 produced substantial increases in prices for corn and other crops, and while the depression of the 1930's did little to advance agriculture, the literature documents the farmer's experience during this pivotal event in United States history. With many farmers under severe debt, government programs developed to carry the farmers through the hard times stayed to shape government's role in regulating agricultural economy. Post-depression agricultural technology developed at the College of Agriculture and promulgated throughout the state formed the foundation for Nebraska's modern agricultural economy, including strains of wheat suited to the soil and rainfall of Nebraska, sugar beets and beans that thrive in the sandy soil of the western part of the state, and forage crops suited to low moisture and cattle grazing. Eventually, meat packing emerged as a significant industry and by the late 1930's the Omaha Stockyards--represented by the packing houses Swift, Cudaly, Wilson and Armour--were one of the largest in the world.

The continued growth and development of agriculture in Nebraska lead to profound changes in rural society, developed the foundation for modern agribusiness, and formed the basis for current environmental and ecological concerns. Important serial publications needing preservation that document the evolution of agriculture and rural society include the *Nebraska State Board of Agriculture Annual Report* (1859-1945), the *Nebraska Brand Book* (1908-1945) displaying horse and cattle brands registered with the Nebraska Secretary of State's Office, and the *Nebraska Farmer*, a popular farm journal that illustrates rural life of Nebraska farmers from the late 19th through early 20th centuries.

Although Nebraska is known for agribusiness, it is also noted for alternative farming. In recent years, the legislature has demonstrated its support of family farming and rural communities with passage of key legislation to preserve the family farm. Nebraska is also home to the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, a nationally-known ecologically-concerned alternative farming center.